

**White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders  
Environmental Protection Agency Site Visit\***

Houston, TX

July 9, 2000

Participants: The Honorable Romulo L. Diaz Jr., Assistant Administrator for Administration and Resources Management, EPA; Mr. Jerry Clifford, Deputy Regional Administrator for EPA Region VI; The Honorable Ngoan Le, Commissioner on the President's Advisory Commission for the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders; Mr. Cao My Nguyen, Vietnamese Community of Houston and Vicinity.

Introduction and welcome by Mr. Nguyen.

**Jerry Clifford:** We are here to accomplish several things – to tell you what EPA does to protect your air, water and land, and to share with you President Clinton's AAPI Initiative and what EPA is doing for it. Intro of Romy Diaz. Intro of Commissioner Ngoan Le. I would like to walk through what we intend to cover – Commissioner Le's overview of White House Initiative, Mr. Diaz' presentation on what EPA is doing for the Initiative, and then we will get into a discussion, to hear from you, what your concerns are about health and environment in your neighborhoods and how we can help you address those concerns.

**Commissioner Ngoan Le:** [Explained the intent of the White House Initiative on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, the appointment of 15 members to the President's Advisory Commission and the workplan that all agencies are required to complete to be submitted in a report to the next President of the United States.] I encourage you to participate in this opportunity.

**Romy Diaz:** Lessons learned from other community sessions: The AAPI community has appreciated that, for the first time, the federal government has come and listened. Language is a particular challenge that faces the AAPI community. There is great variety within the community and data that is general doesn't tell us enough about individual subpopulations. There are cultural issues related to the environment and public health issues that the community faces (*e.g.* fish consumption – we need to know what kind of fish consumption there is so that we know what risks there are to your health and environment). Many of you came here today not knowing what EPA is – I want to stress that certain environmental risks, which translate into health risks, are higher in your community and other minority communities, so we need to work together to improve environmental and public health protections. We want to do a better job of putting a face on EPA and its mission. Finally, you want to know where the financial resources are that can help your community. So we have designed a strategy to listen to you in 4 principal areas: 1) community partnerships; 2) economic opportunities for financial assistance

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\*These are unofficial notes from a community meeting, which was the subject of informal, simultaneous translations in Vietnamese and English, with translation provided by an EPA Region VI employee.

and contracts; 3) educational opportunities – we would like to hear from you about how we can reach AAPI students; and 4) opportunities for improving our workforce – we need to bring in more AAPI employees to improve delivery of programs and services to you. Because we in DC are so far away, it's important that we engage in this dialogue with you in partnership with our Regional office in Dallas. Thank you for being here. I'm interested in listening to you about how we can address these 4 areas.

**Jerry Clifford:** How many people have heard of EPA before today? (Many) How many of you have worked with anyone from EPA before? (a few) The types of things we work on at the national level and regional level – we are responsible for making sure the air you breath is clean, water is safe to drink, the land is safe to walk on and for your children to play on. We're responsible for making sure that the environment that you live and work in and harvest animals from is safe. In addition, a small area of our work impacts all of you in your homes – chemicals in paint that could be in your homes that could cause harm to your children. We regulate many businesses and industries to make sure that the pollution they release into the air and water is not at a level harmful to you. In the Regional office, our region covers five states including TX, with a little over 900 people working to protect the environment in those states. We work with state agencies that take state and federal money to run programs at the state level. In TX, it's the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission. There is a local office here in Houston, so those of you who are interested should meet with Mr. Lee to get to know him. We have a lab in Houston with people from there here as well (John and Neal). So if you have questions after today, contact them. Lisa Pham did a great job translating literature available at the table in back. Some of that information explains the types of health issues you may want to be aware of that relate to your children, such as pesticides you use in your home and your yard, and the type of paint that's in your house. There is also a guide to eating fish. For those of you who don't know, if chemicals get into waters, they get taken up by fish and if we eat them, they can cause problems. Another problem for children is asthma – the number one reason for our children missing school. Air pollution in summer severely aggravates asthma. In addition, we've learned that insects in homes (roaches) aggravate asthma because of what they leave on the ground where the children play. Unfortunately, I have asthma. My mother is Japanese and I grew up eating a lot of fish – so I have to be aware of both of these issues. The state of TX will be proposing a plan for addressing the air quality problem (ozone). On Aug 8, that plan will go out for comment. Those of you concerned about this, you may want to look out for that public notice, and you can contact the local office to get a copy of it. Let's open it up to hear your questions and comments.

**Q:** Thank you for coming – I am concerned about indoor air pollution from dirty air ducts that cost too much money to clean – what can we do? I live in a town home right on the street – how can we avoid dirty air from cars getting into our houses. As for roaches – if we pay to get rid of roaches but the neighbor doesn't and the roaches come back, what should we do?

**A:** Romy – One of the driving forces for EPA coming to you today is to put information in the hands of communities and individuals so that they can make decisions for themselves about acceptable levels of environmental and public health risks. Philosophically, this Administration does not believe that we can

make all of these decisions for you in DC or in Dallas. We understand that we have regulatory responsibilities to meet, as well as practical tools to share, that can help you.

**A: Jerry** – EPA doesn't regulate pollution indoors except for commercial buildings and schools. In the home, the problem with mildew and dusts in ducts is a serious problem, especially in regard to asthma. We may have some guidance, but I'm not aware of it. If we do, make sure you get your name to our local person and we'll get you the information. For auto pollution, we do regulate it. Today's cars are 90% cleaner than brand new cars 15 yrs ago. But light duty and heavy duty trucks were not regulated to same level. Within the last 6 months, EPA has decided to regulate those vehicles so that over the next 7 years, those vehicles will be 90% cleaner than today. There is a problem with old cars. In some communities, through traffic can be restricted in residential communities. It's not something we regulate, but it's something you can go to your city council about.

**Q:** Water supply – I sporadically have black things floating in my tap water. I have called people about it but was told that there's nothing I can do short of having it tested by a private lab. I'm concerned about my son drinking this water at the water fountain at his school. It could just be my subdivision, but I don't know. I see a lot of people with filters. I won't drink it.

**A:** Back to the person who asked about roaches in her home – my advice for you is to have a meeting among town home residents to educate everyone about the importance of and how to take care of the problem. For the water question – EPA does regulate public water (talk to Mr. Lee). But we don't regulate bottled water, so the water from your tap could be cleaner than this bottled water. All municipalities are required to develop Consumer Confidence reports, which come out every July. Everyone should be getting this report with your water bill that will tell you if water quality standards were violated. You can also call them to get last year's report. It's possible in older homes that there is a problem between the water main (regulated by city) and the home, and there's no way to know. You have to bring a water sample to a private lab for analysis.

**Romy:** 95% of American households meet tough federal health standards for tap water. EPA has worked successfully with local authorities to ensure that air quality concerns that communities have (*e.g.* location of air quality monitors) are addressed. So there are ways the community can come together to make sure these concerns are addressed by the relevant local, state and federal authorities.

**Q:** I represent 700 people in a condominium assoc. First issue: many of us Vietnamese live in a condo that's about 40 yrs old. Sewage system usually backs up or breaks down and we have to fix it ourselves. Residents in the condo park are elderly and disabled – we live on subsistence so it's a heavy burden for us to deal with. Second, the boiler has broken down and a replacement will cost at least \$1000. Third, our condo area is built next to a forest that has been cleared so lots of pests (mosquitos, flies) affect our health. Who do we address these concerns to? EPA, local people? Does EPA have a Web site?

**A: Romy** – EPA doesn't have responsibility for sewage backups. While we may not have a direct responsibility for these concerns, there is a sign up sheet in back so we can circulate your questions to the people who are responsible. As we go through these listening sessions, we are sharing the information with other federal agencies, and we will also pass on concerns to state and local authorities. EPA's Web site is found at [www.epa.gov](http://www.epa.gov), where you can find zip code-level information about the state of your air, water and land.

**Rogene Calvert:** (Office of Councilman Gordon Quan) – the city is responsible for this, call us. I heard Mr. Diaz say there are funds available, so let's talk about how we can get those funds.

**Romy:** We will be in direct contact with Councilman's office to follow up.

**Q:** I am concerned that regulations of air pollution were supposed to govern use of diesel, yet ten years later, trucks still use it. The trucks emit a lot of pollution. Why do we still allow this? Insecticides are used in agricultural products and restaurants are not required to wash the food – how do we know we're not eating the insecticides? Does EPA have any programs that regulate companies that produce pesticides to kill mosquitos?

**A: Jerry** – Concerning diesel fuel in trucks – we have not regulated the use of diesel fuel. The problem is that diesel fuel ruins catalytic converters. But the technology is available now and the regulations I mentioned earlier address this issue. They will be coming into effect in the next 7 years.

**Romy:** In regard to pesticides, this is an issue that affects people from the production end to consumption end. We have programs related to migrant farm workers. EPA is responsible for determining which pesticides are acceptable for agricultural use. We also require training for people who work with these chemicals. It's important for the consumers to know what they can do to protect themselves, and we have prepared information brochures on that. And I understand that we have to make sure the information is translated into the appropriate languages.

**Jerry:** We regulate the amount of pesticides allowed on a piece of fruit of vegetables when its sold without washing. But we advise you to wash it anyway.

**Q:** Most of the people in the community are elderly, don't speak English, and have few resources. The elderly Vietnamese are usually taken care of by the rest of the family. The key point here is access to information, and the issue is language. In order to spread the information, we need the local people in the community to do it. We need EPA to assist us in locating resources to do this. To Rogene – my family has a problem with a broken sewage line and the city has to do something about it.

**A: Romy** – We have a series of documents available about different kinds of environmental health risks. We will send a package of all materials we have in Vietnamese to Councilman Quan's office and to Mr. Nguyen. I will also commit to providing that information on financial resources in summary form,

translated into Vietnamese, to the Councilman's office and to Mr. Nguyen. We will be creating a Web site for all information available on EPA's response to White House Initiative and will send the address as soon as it becomes available.

**Q:** You mentioned that AAPIs suffer more from environmental pollution than other communities – what is the difference? The information about what EPA has jurisdiction over should also be disseminated. Sending information to Councilman's or Mr. Nguyen's offices not enough. They need resources to send it out. I suggest you use other ways to disseminate information. It is not effective to send resources to institutions of higher education.

**A: Romy** – The information we have collected so far from our site visits has mirrored the challenges we have encountered among minority communities across the country generally. You shouldn't have to worry how all of the authorities interact, so we will work with other agencies to make it easier for you. Good point on how we can be more helpful in supporting community based organizations and will look into working with the Councilman's office to help with things like mailing. As for educational institutions, because there are no institutions that are identified as AAPI, it has been suggested that we look to institutions that have centers for Asian studies that are respected by the communities.

**Q:** Air emissions – Why do emission inspections go by county? Also, there doesn't seem to be any initiatives in the area for recycling.

**A: Jerry:** As for the emissions question, that is a state issue. EPA's position is, if the state can figure out a way to reduce emissions to meet federal standards, then how they do it is up to them. Re: recycling – it's a local responsibility.

**A: Romy:** Recycling is driven by economics. Something to consider is how to bring recycling to more people's attention, because the more people are interested in doing it, the more likely it can be done. We can help to create interest.

**A: Commissioner Ngoan Le:** the questions related to EPA and answers that it's not within EPA's purview, are perfect examples of when people are responsible for coming together to find the solutions to their problems. What we want to change, we have to make it happen ourselves. This White House Initiative is to make federal agencies more responsive to us. From now until we submit the report, there are lots of opportunities to be a part of this.

**A: Romy:** Thank you for coming. I endorse the comments Commissioner Le made. We are here to help empower you by making sure you have the information and access to the resources to do it. We know that with this Initiative, we can't treat all communities alike. We know that the Vietnamese community has special challenges regarding language. We want to continue this dialogue, and we intend to make it a long term engagement.

**Mr. Nguyen:** We need to work together, not only within the Vietnamese community, but will all of the other Asian communities.

**Q:** Financial resources are hidden from Asian community in general – you should publish all of the resources available to the community. Some of us do send proposals, but don't fare well and I don't understand why.

*[A long dialogue ensued that was not translated into English]*

**A: Romy** – I commit to sending a technical assistance team here to help you access and manage financial assistance.